

General Advice for Writing Philosophy:

Thinking through the question: If there is a set question, make sure you understand it. Your essay should explain any technical terms, positions, and arguments mentioned in the question.

Finding your contribution: You may wonder how you can contribute to a debate. Here are some tips to finding you

- Do you feel undecided about which position to adopt even after hearing the arguments for and against? Good news: you find these arguments unconvincing. Try to figure out why. What about the arguments has failed to satisfy you? What needs to be decided before the argument can succeed? Articulating these reservations can be your contribution to the debate. You should look for other philosophers who have had a similar reaction.
- Do you have a strong reaction in favour of or against one of the positions discussed in the debate? Find the source of this reaction. Are you reacting to the position itself or to an argument for it? This may be a way to find a contribution. However, more often than not, I find that my initial reaction was misguided. In many cases, I simply fail to understand the position or confused the position with an argument for it. Thinking through how the proponent of the position would respond to my criticism allows me to better understand it.
- If you don't like the conclusion of the argument but can't identify a definite flaw, then you might try to figure out which premise in the argument you have to reject to make your position coherent. What would a position that rejects this premise look like? Many great philosophy papers show how a position can be modified in response to an argument.
- Along similar lines, you might have a knock-down proof that an argument cannot succeed. If so, that's great. But, good philosophy doesn't always offer a conclusive reason to reject an argument. It often just advances the debate. To do well on this essay, we want critical engagement. If you can show that the debate turns on a controversial thesis (that two issues are interestingly intertwined), then that would be a positive development in the debate.

Charity and clarity in exposition: One of the most important tasks you should learn in a philosophy class is to charitably and clearly explain a position or argument you disagree with.

- It is absolutely essential that you figure out what the position is, why someone would hold it, and how its proponents would respond to the most obvious criticisms.
- Think through your initial reaction. How would a proponent of the position you don't like respond? As stated above, this can help you understand what is at issue.
- For a stab at a first draft, pretend you are writing a very short essay (around 500 words) defending the argument you want to assess or critique.

- It is best to make sure that you present a version of the argument that is valid. That way you can uncover any hidden assumptions behind the argument or find a specific premise to object to.
- If the argument is straightforward enough, it's often best to present it in a paragraph rather than separating it out from the text. But make sure that you are clear to the reader what the premises and conclusion of the argument are. You can use signal words such as 'therefore' or 'because'. Or, it might be useful to indent specific premises that call for further discussion.
- If the argument is more complicated, then it can be useful to separate the argument as a whole from the main text using bullets or numbered list. Writing the argument in this way can be useful to clarify your thoughts. But I would avoid over-reliance of this technique rather than simply incorporating the argument into prose. If used excessively, it can lead students to present an argument in a more complicated way than is necessary.

General Advice for Writing:

Use grounded and consistent terminology. Make sure that the reader is in a position to understand any technical or tricky words in your essay. *Problems might arise from:*

- Using unclear expressions, or expressions with senses different from their ordinary senses, or overly general expressions.
- Not making clear when an expression is taken as primitive (undefined) or not providing some way of grasping how primitive words are being used (for instance, by providing an example)
- Changing expressions midway through the essay.
- Having an unnecessary list of defined terms at the beginning of the essay rather than naturally introducing terms as they become relevant.

Use Philosophical Terminology Correctly. It is very jarring to read an essay that calls an argument "true" or a particular thesis "valid".

- Make sure you've mastered very basic philosophical terminology such as: true, false, valid, sound, refute, and so on. Know what kinds of things these expressions apply to.
- Don't make stronger claims than you can justify. So, for example, don't say that a position is refuted when it is merely challenged.
- Relatedly, make sure that you are careful about the difference between using an expression and mentioning it. (Consider the name, 'John'. I *use* the name to refer to a person when I say 'John is hungry'. I *mention* the name when I say "'John' has four letters.")

Internal coherence: Make sure that the parts of the essay are properly integrated.

- Motivate your project in your introduction.
 - Begin with a problem and a description of how you are going to solve it.

- Or, begin by stating that there is an argument for a controversial or paradoxical conclusion that you will critique.
- It can help to use a consistent example (or minor variations on a single example) to illustrate different theses. If you were, say, talking about theses regarding which actions are right, you might use a single example of an action and say whether it was right according to the different theses.
- Make the structure clear of the argument you are going to evaluate.
- Properly link up your critical analysis with the argument or position discussed. Make sure you have flagged the relevant premise or inference that you will assess when you are discussing the argument.
- Make sure that the sentences in each paragraph hang together. Make sure your essay is not just a series of unrelated sentences on a common topic. (Or sentences whose connection is opaque to the reader.)

Don't do too much: Remember that you have limited space! Explain the argument. Examine a limited number of rebuttals to it in depth. (This may require examining possible responses to the challenge.) Don't try to cram in as many rebuttals to the argument as you can. This will lead you to an unsatisfactory presentation of all of them.

Guidance from Edinburgh Philosophy

- <http://students.ppls.ed.ac.uk/study-skills/philosophy/>
- <http://students.ppls.ed.ac.uk/study-skills/philosophy/common-problems-in-philosophy-essays/>

Some standard philosophical writing advice:

- <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>
- <http://www.sfu.ca/philosophy/resources/writing.html>